

FANTASY STORY MAGAZINE

SEPT. 25¢

HYPERPELLO
by L. Sprague de Camp
STOLEN CENTURIES
by Otis Adelbert Kline
EXPERIMENT
by Roscoe Clark
THE MAN WHO LOOKED
LIKE STEINMETZ
by Robert Moore Williams



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

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VOL. 6, No. 2
SEPTEMBER, 1953

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The survivors of the Mars I were beyond hope when the time came for . . .

LIBERATION

THE officers of the *Mars II* stood at ports and watched the battle. They looked through binoculars at the Martians, with their pyramidal bodies, round smooth heads and kangaroo legs. The fifty-year-old hull of the *Mars II* lay half-buried in sand, about five miles off toward the eastern horizon. Near it was a Martian city.

Up in the captain's cabin, Lieutenant Eric North put into words the silent thought of every officer and man. "Do

you think we'll find them alive, sir?"

Captain Harrap deliberated his answer. "I hope so," he said at last. "Wayne may be dead, but the others were young enough when it happened so that they may still be alive."

"Who was Wayne?" asked young Lieutenant North.

"Ulysses Wayne?" the Captain spoke reminiscently. "Guess you're too young to remember. But he was the man who designed the *Mars I*. He was an elec-

By **SAM SACKETT**

tronics whiz, a mathematical genius, a physicist, too. But more than that—he had the vision of Mars, and the enthusiasm to get the financial backing they needed for that first trip almost fifty years ago. . . .”

They studied the scene. North's eyes dwelt on the hulk that had once been the *Mars I*. He mused, “If I were a Martian”

“What?”

“I'd bring out the survivors of the *Mars I* as hostages to win a truce—if they're still alive.”

Harrap said, “The only way to be sure is to find out.”

Gradually the Martians gave up. Harrap ordered the rocket to descend. Slowly the space monster sank near the spot where its dead predecessor lay like a grotesque metal ostrich, half hidden from the truth. The ship settled. There was about as much jolt as when an elevator stops, and it had rested.

Harrap spoke again and the man emerged from the ship. They moved through the city, and beyond the city to the sands and the hills. Finally they found a cavern, guarded by a metal gate. The Earthmen entered, and the gate clanged shut behind them.

The cave was black, and they paused at its mouth. A scream terrified them. North pulled out his gun and was ready to fire before his wits settled back. “For God's sake, sir,” he said, “what was that?”

“We'll see,” Harrap said grimly. “Let's have a light in here.”

A crewman played his flashlight around the cave. North's eager eyes followed the circle of light as it picked out the cavern's interior.

The man dropped the light and it went out to the tinkling of broken glass.

They had seen three old men, shrunk-en, bearded, chained to the sunless walls of the cave. . . .

A HUMAN being could live a hundred Earth years at that time. These three men had been chained in the cave

for almost half that time; their remembrances of the years before that were dim.

The darkness in which they sat was made only more black by the fact that, half the hours of the day, light shone in from the entrance upon the rear wall of the cavern. When the light went out, they slept. And so they remained, not twenty feet apart, for almost fifty years; and not one of them had seen the others in all that time.

The Timer awoke as the light on the cavern wall was growing out of dimness. This was the seven hundredth Light of the sixteen-thousand Lights they had been here. Tomorrow would be the seven-hundred-first Light. He stretched as much as his shackles would allow, a practice in which he had had ample time to become adept.

“Are you awake, Timer?”

“Yes, Singer.”

Neither was surprised that the other knew his identity. When you have been chained in the same cave with men for half a century, you come to know them by the distance of a clanking fetter or the sound of a voice.

“Observer?” he heard the Singer ask.

“Awake,” came a voice from the position where he could most easily see the light on the rear wall.

The Timer asked, “How long until Feeding?”

“Long enough for prayer,” the Observer replied.

The Singer began the ritual: “We pray to thee, Marshan.” The others repeated after him. He continued, “We thank thee for our lives. . . . We thank thee for the Feedings thou hast given us. . . . We pray thou wilt give us Feedings today. . . . We pray thou wilt deliver us. . . .”

Over the years they had developed an extensive litany—more than they could ever use.

At the conclusion of the ritual, the Timer told them what Light it was.

They sat silently and meditated until the Observer began to describe what he saw in the light. All could see it, but he

was best situated. "The light is growing brighter," he said. "It is so bright that I can see the Pock. So far, I cannot see either the Nub or the Face." When the Nub came into view, there would be the Feeding.

The Singer sang a song in praise of the Nub which brought them their Feedings.

Soon the Observer was able to make out the Nub, and the Singer began to hymn the Shadow and the Clang.

Then they heard the Clang, and the Shadow approached, looming big in the light.

The Observer described it; it was a black triangle with a black circle above it. It was rising. Then there were humps at each side of the base of the triangle. Then it was descending: the humps were gone, then the triangle, then the circle. Soon it began to ascend again, the circle, the triangle, the humps. When it descended for good and all, there would be the Feeding. It was gone, there was another Clang, and each of the men found Feeding-stuff beside him.

The Singer sang thanks to Marshan, and they fell to. This was the first Feeding; there would be two more that day. After the Feeding there was more prayer and meditation, and then the Timer announced that it was time for talking.

Their chief topic of conversation for the past seven-hundred Lights had been whether the Nub, the Shadow, or the Clang brought the Feeding.

The Observer favored the Nub, the Singer the Shadow, and the Timer the Clang. They argued by clearly defined time limits, the Timer keeping count for the other two, and the Observer limiting him.

WHEN they were through with this discussion, it was time for them to play on their Game. The Timer told the Singer and the Observer, who were playing this time, the positions of their pieces. After a long pause, the Singer, whose turn it was to move, advanced his rook to queen's bishop four. The Observer would make his move tomorrow.

It was time now for Prayer before the second Feeding. The Singer chanted the same litany, and they two repeated. Then he sang to the Nub, and they meditated for the prescribed time, as limited by the Timer. Then it was time to chant for the Shadow and the Clang.

But when the singing was done, the Clang did not sound, nor did the Shadow appear.

The Singer was frightened, and his frenzied singings showed it. The other two were frightened in their silence.

This was the first time in sixteen-thousand-seven-hundred Lights that the Clang had not sounded nor the Shadow appeared when they had prayed for it before Feeding.

"Sing us," the Timer suggested, "of the Past." It would take their minds from their fear.

The singer began shakily, because he was still afraid, but at length his voice grew more assured. He sang of five men who had ridden on the back of a comet, its tail streaking red through the black sky; he sang of their coming to the Land, and of the god Marshan and his enslavement of them in the Black Place. And he sang how the god had taken first one, then another.

But when he had finished, there was still no Clang and no Shadow and no feeding stuff.

The Observer tried to escape terror by beginning on last thousand-light's argument: the reasons why the Shadow went up and down twice before the Feeding.

But his voice broke off in the middle of it, and he could not go on.

There was still no Clang and no Shadow.

Then the Observer made his move in the Game. But at the end of that the silence was still unbroken and the light was still undarkened.

They sat in silent terror until there was a Clang, and the Singer began to raise thanks to Marshan.

But then they saw the Shadow, and it was different than they had ever seen

it before; it was long and thin, instead of triangular, and it was oval instead of circular. First there was one, and then there were two, and three, and more numbers than the men in the cave could count.

They screamed their fear. . . .

AFTER a moment of surprise, Harrap called for more lights, and then he and North, removing their masks, descended into the interior. They found that the path which led to the opening went right down into the cave.

On impulse, Harrap called out, "Dr. Wayne?"

There was no answer, but the echoes of his own voice. The three men inside looked at him in terror. One of them was working his mouth, but no sound came out. As he drew close, North noticed that the pupils of their eyes were abnormally small, as a violent reaction from more light than they had seen in almost fifty years.

Harrap addressed the prisoners: "I am Captain Harrap, of the *Mars II*. I assume that you are the survivors of the *Mars I*, under the leadership of Dr. Ulysses Wayne."

North saw that in addition to the three men there lay two empty sets of fetters.

Harrap read off the names of the other members of the Wayne expedition, but the men in the cave showed no recognition. Finally he said, sticking his thumb at his chest, "Harrap." He pointed at the nearest of the old men. "You?" he asked.

The old man blinked at him. He was pale and shrunken; his ribs were visible, and his matted beard reached his knees. "Singer," he replied.

Singer? North reflected. There was no one named Singer on the *Mars I*.

Then another said, "Timer," and the one in the middle said "Observer."

North felt ice press his heart.

Harrap said, "We come from Earth."

The men made no show of recognition.

"We are here to rescue you from the Martians."

Suddenly the men smiled and nodded; their faces filled with life. The one who called himself the Singer said, "We pray to thee, Marshan," and the others repeated after him. The Earthmen listened soberly as they completed their fantastic ritual.

Harrap seemed to age as he stood there. When the litany was over, he ordered the men cut free.

The hacksaw ate through the metal, and the fetters were removed. Crewmembers helped the emaciated prisoners to their feet; but the men were so unused to standing that they collapsed if they were not held erect.

The prisoners took all this without a word; but when they were carried toward the cave entrance and realized that they were to be taken out they began to cry and moan with the feeble strength that remained to them.

"It breaks a man's heart," Harrap muttered to North. North found that he couldn't reply. "Put them back where they were," Harrap said. "I guess they're happier there."

The three old men were led back to their seats and placed in them.

Harrap said, "We'll see that they get good food, and we'll try to make them comfortable. Maybe in time we'll win them over, but probably they've only a few more years to live." He reached into his kit and brought out a biscuit, offering it to the Singer.

The old man took it and held it in his hands, turning it over and over, looking at it and smelling it.

Harrap broke off a piece of the wafer and ate it. The old man broke off a piece and put it into his mouth. He meditated as he chewed it.

"Come on!" Harrap's voice was sharp. The men left the cave and went out into the cold, red sand of the Martian desert.

North looked back as he left, the grate clanged behind him.

The Singer was still chewing, and still meditating on the Clang. ● ● ●